Ministry of Natural Resources
Ministère des Richesses naturelles
Ontario

Fact Sheet

Actualités

August 1990

RABIES PROJECT 1990

The Ministry of Natural Resources will spend $2.6-million on its rabies research and control program in 1990-91. The program will focus on foxes and skunks, the major carriers of rabies.

The program involves two components:

I **Metropolitan Toronto Urban Rabies Project**

Why: To continue tests to immunize foxes and skunks in populated areas. To control the spread of rabies.

How: a) Vaccine administered to foxes orally in a bait.
b) Skunks trapped, vaccinated by injection, and released again.

II **Eastern Ontario Rural Rabies Program**

Why: To continue a large-scale experiment in controlling rabies by immunizing foxes (the major carrier of rabies in rural areas) in a rural setting.

How: A large-scale experimental field trial in which foxes will be vaccinated against rabies by distributing vaccine-baits from aircraft, over rural land.

Rabies in Foxes

- In Metropolitan Toronto, there are significant fox populations in ravines.
- During May and June, MNR identified the location of fox dens in ravines at a time of year when they are grouped in families with their young.

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- From June 11 to 22, foxes were immunized by placing an oral vaccine, encased in a "bait" of tallow and wax scented with chicken, near fox-pup rearing dens. The young foxes are in close contact at this time and risk spreading rabies in the group. Baits were also placed in the ravines throughout Metropolitan Toronto.

- The boundaries of the vaccination area are the Rouge River to the east, the Credit River to the west, Major Mackenzie Drive to the north and Lake Ontario to the south.

- Tests from the 1989 baiting project revealed that nearly 80 per cent of the foxes that took the bait were immunized. MNR is improving the bait so that a greater number of foxes will be immunized by eating the vaccine.

- Baits will again be distributed throughout ravines in Metropolitan Toronto from October 15 to October 30 to ensure that all foxes are immunized.

Rabies in Skunks

- Skunks are also prone to rabies in urban areas.

- From July 3 to November 2, MNR will continue its already successful project in Scarborough to immunize skunks against rabies. Skunks will be trapped, vaccinated by injection, and released. The traps will not harm animals, including domestic pets.

- Skunks must be injected with vaccine because the fox oral vaccine does not work on skunks. Recent research on an oral vaccine for skunks shows promise.

- The trap-vaccinate-release strategy has been used for the past three years in Scarborough and has successfully immunized 98 per cent of the skunks captured.

- Between 1980 and 1987 there were 45 reported cases of rabies in skunks in the Scarborough vaccination area. Since 1987, there have been only three cases in skunks.

- This year, the City of Windsor will conduct a trap-vaccinate-release program for skunks from July to November. The program will follow the same procedures developed during the Scarborough project.

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Facts About Rabies

- Southern Ontario has more incidents of animal rabies than any other province or state in North America.

- Each year, between 2,000 and 3,000 Ontarians receive anti-rabies vaccine because of contact with a rabid animal. In 1989, health inspectors investigated about 32,000 cases of possible human contact with suspected rabid animals in Ontario.

- Rabies results in costs of close to $26 million a year in Ontario, including costs of diagnosis, pet vaccination, compensation to farmers for loss of livestock, costs of quarantine, research and treatment of humans contacting rabid animals.

- Rabies is spread in the wild primarily by foxes and skunks, and occurs mostly in agricultural areas and cities in southern Ontario.

Rabies as a Health Risk

- People who may have been bitten by or been in contact with a rabid animal should cleanse the wound or exposed area thoroughly with soap and water and get in touch with a doctor or hospital emergency ward immediately. Rabies vaccine and antiserum will be administered as required.

- Post-exposure treatment consists of a relatively pain-free series of five shots of human diploid cell vaccine, which is administered in the arm or shoulder. The treatment may also include shots of rabies immune globulin.

- People should be wary of animals that behave strangely. Animals which are normally shy may lunge and bite, even when they appear to be paralysed. Wild animals that appear to be unusually tame may, in fact, be rabid.

- Rabies is a viral disease which enters the body through a bite or wound and spreads to the central nervous system.

- Symptoms in humans include irritation at the site of the bite, general excitability and irritability, difficulty in swallowing and finally paralysis prior to death.

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- Symptoms may appear from two weeks to a year or more after contact. Once symptoms appear, rabies is nearly always fatal. Early vaccination is the best preventive when humans are bitten.

- People, particularly children, should be advised not to pet strange animals or handle any sick animal or one found dead. Such incidents should be reported to parents and in turn to authorities. The Ontario Ministry of Health should be consulted regarding questions of human exposure.

- As a precaution, pets should be seen once a year by a veterinarian for rabies vaccination.

Other Agencies

- Member agencies of the provincial Rabies Advisory Committee who have been involved in the rabies research program include the Ontario Veterinary College, the Ministry of Health, Connaught Laboratories, Agriculture Canada, the Ministry of Agriculture and Food, the University of Waterloo Department of Biology and the Ministry of Natural Resources.

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